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OF ECONOMICS AND
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

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Author(s): Alan Warde

Source: *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Jun., 1982), pp. 224-237

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The London School of Economics and Political Science

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/589933>

Accessed: 24/08/2009 11:37

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E. P. Thompson and 'poor' theory*

ABSTRACT

This paper contests the view of historical method, and especially of the relation between history and social theory, advanced by E. P. Thompson in his essay 'The Poverty of Theory'. It is maintained that he recurs to a methodological position similar in important respects to that of Max Weber. Thompson's proposed methodology, founded on a sharp separation of science and politics, is inconsistent with both his political commitment and his own historical work. The inconsistencies are explored with a view to affirming the interrelatedness of history, theory and practice.

In this paper I want to add another dimension to the debate on 'The Poverty of Theory' which, so far, has concentrated on the adequacies of Althusser and Theory.¹ Consideration of the substantive elements of Thompson's counter-position leads me to believe that his essay is a grand optical illusion. At first glance it appears to be a political argument against latter-day Stalinism on the authority of an epistemological and methodological analysis of historians' procedures. When one looks again, it becomes a defence of the historians' procedures on the basis of a politico-emotional appeal to anti-Stalinism. I shall try to expose this *trompe l'oeil*.

I consider that Thompson has presented a view of historical method which is a conventional orthodoxy among his professional peers; that he evades the sceptical critique of history and historicism; that in the process he elaborates a view of historical procedures fundamentally similar to that of Max Weber; that such a method postulates a radical disjuncture between science and politics which is incommensurable with both the Marxist postulate of the unity of theory and practice and with Thompson's own historical work; and that his attempt to reconcile his Marxist commitment with historical procedure is profoundly contradictory. The contradiction may be expressed in terms

of the contrary pressures of professional neutrality and political commitment.

Let me first, however, point out some of the things I am not saying. I am not trying to vindicate Althusser against Thompson, though I am seeking to rescue social and economic theory from dissolution at the hands of history. I am not introducing Weber in order to damn Thompson by association. Rather, the deficiencies of Weber's methodological position are relatively well established and the parallel, besides being interesting in itself, provides a short cut to effective critique. And finally, I am not trying to prove that Thompson is not a Marxist, whatever that may mean, for despite his protestations to the contrary, I believe that he would, with justice, be disturbed by such an undeserving judgment. However, I do think that he has adopted a view of historical method incompatible with his own Marxism.

DAMNED THEORETICIANS

In his lengthy peroration on the historian's procedures, Thompson essentially *redescribes*, in idealized form, the historian's practice. He recounts the many devices which historians employ in order to establish the reliability of their sources, the generality of their evidence and the accepted conventions for adjudicating between competing interpretations of data. The explicit aim of that discussion is to refute the sceptical, even solipsistic, critique of historical knowledge advanced by Althusserians. This exercise is, however, logically futile since an account of what historians, or historical materialists, do cannot establish an epistemological justification for the validity of their conclusions. No summation of the appropriate conventions of historical scholarship can meet the objections of Althusser or Hindess and Hirst.² This is not because the latter are obstinate or incorrigible, but because they are engaged in an entirely different type of discourse which cannot be contested on the level of adequate technique. Indeed Thompson, perhaps unwittingly, appears to acknowledge this in a passage where he implies that the writing of history depends upon a leap of faith:

A historian is entitled in his practice to make a provisional assumption of an epistemological character: that the evidence which he handles has a 'real' (determinant) existence independent of its existence within forms of thought, that this evidence is witness to a real historical process, and that this process (or some approximate understanding of it) is the object of historical knowledge. Without making such assumptions he cannot proceed.³

One can accept that these 'assumptions' are necessary to history-writing as we know it, but that is no refutation of the sceptical

position. The sceptic remains justified in saying that history-writing is impossible: abandon history, or alternatively recognize the fictional and ideological character of 'historical' accounts and employ them as political weapons, or indeed, professional credentials, but do not claim objective validity for them. Nowhere does Thompson confront this argument in its own terms. In fact I cannot conceive a satisfactory epistemological refutation of it. The historian's wager is necessary. Thompson however doubly confuses the issue by appearing to resolve it *via* descriptions of adequate technique. He partly obscures the matter by using the term 'history' to refer both to prior events and processes (henceforth, the past) and to written accounts of such events and processes (history). More significantly, in the attempt to confront the sceptics and justify the wager, he believes it necessary to have ultimate recourse to independently validating evidence. But at the same time he feels obliged to accommodate the critics of 'empiricist history',⁴ recognizing the limitations of a view which maintains that evidence is solid and incontrovertible, untainted by the historian's intervention. In order to hold these two positions together he regresses onto the methodological terrain of Max Weber.

THOMPSON, WEBER AND HISTORICAL METHOD

Edward Thompson's view of historical method coincides with that of Weber in at least five respects: (1) facts, or evidence, are distinct from concepts; (2) interpretations are constructed after the fact: when the historian offers interpretations or 'value judgments' these are subsequent to, and are licensed by, what actually happened; (3) history is primarily a study of actors' meanings; (4) historical explanation is never deterministic: historical 'eventuation' is a complex effect of intentional actions which cannot be re-stated as laws or regularities, but only as 'probabilities'; (5) categories and concepts of the historian are 'elastic', they are heuristic fictions, or, 'ideal types'.

(1) Thompson's antagonists postulate that 'facts' are nothing but concepts presented to the historian, facts are social constructions which belong to the realm of knowledge and are not the givens of the real past. As the quotation above shows, Thompson rejects this view, claiming that evidence 'has a "real" (determinant) existence independent of its existence within forms of thought' which 'is witness to a real historical process'. He considers that 'historical "facts" are "produced", by appropriate disciplines, from the evidential facts'.⁵ This implies that there are two levels of fact: 'historical fact' which is a construction of the historian through procedures of selection with a view to solving a particular problem, and 'evidential fact' which is inscribed in the source material. This distinction would seem to result from an attempt to satisfy the critics of empiricist history, by recognizing the historian's intervention in producing 'historical facts',

whilst contesting the sceptical critique by preserving the givenness of 'evidential facts'. However, the presentation of the regulated procedures for transforming evidential facts into historical facts evades rather than resolves the problem of facticity. Thompson introduces a new level, historical fact, which cannot be considered immune or innocent of theoretico-conceptual intervention and hence merely displaces, but does not remove, the problems of relationship between concept and given data. It does not establish the epistemological point that Thompson wishes to make, that the evidence is a determinate measure of the 'real' past rather than a construction of historical thought. Far easier it was for Weber who, unencumbered with the critique of empiricism, could assume that concepts were innocent because they were empirical categories.⁶

(2) Thompson also wants to distinguish interpretation from fact. He maintains, as did Weber, that interpretation is logically subsequent to the determination of both historical and evidential facts. He says,

When we speak of the 'intelligibility' of history, we may mean the understanding of the rationality (of causation etc.) of historical process: this is an objective knowledge, disclosed in a dialogue with determinate evidence. But we may also imply the 'significance' of that past, its meaning *to us*; this is an evaluative and subjective judgment, and to such interrogatives the evidence can supply no answers.⁷

Determining the 'significance' of history is not, Thompson says, an illegitimate activity. Indeed, he later asserts that it is important that 'significances' are brought to light, for that is the way in which 'we affirm and renew our meanings' in political practice.⁸ It is precisely this which makes written history relevant to politics. But such judgments are distinct from objective knowledge of the past. The 'intelligibility' of history is of a different logical order, is separable from, and is prior to its 'significance'. This is a problematic claim, dependent upon both the separation of fact and concept and a radical separation between concepts which indicate 'intelligibility' and those which bear 'significance'. The difficulty of making this latter distinction is apparent in a subsequent passage in 'The Poverty of Theory':

I am not in the least embarrassed by the fact that, when presenting the results of my own historical research I offer value judgments as to past process, whether openly or strenuously, or in the form of ironies or asides. This is proper, in one part, because the historian is examining lives and choices, and not only historical eventuation (process). And while we may not attribute value to process, the same objections do not arise with the same force when we are considering the choices of individuals, whose acts and intentions may certainly be judged (as they were by contemporaries) within the due and relevant historical context.⁹

This is thoroughly confusing. Thompson says that he offers value judgments about past process. But this is improper since only individual choices may be subjected to judgment. Or, at least, individual choices may more 'properly be subjected to judgment'. The problems are considerable: in what ways is process (eventuation) different to individual choices which renders it immune to judgment?; is not eventuation, in Thompson's terms, a complex of individual and collective actions which actually constitutes a process?; do not the concepts which represent process simultaneously render history both 'intelligible' and 'significant', hence invalidating the distinction between value-judgment and process? For Thompson facts are objective; and process *may* be so too. However, the intention of the argument is, clearly, to establish that there are two distinct realms of discourse and reality, both legitimate, one the objective rendering of the past, the other the realm of 'value judgment' which is relevant to the present. This was precisely the force of Weber's two essays 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation',¹⁰ which urged that objective scientific knowledge was possible, but that the application of that knowledge was logically distinct and practically separable since it resided in the realm of morals or politics. Such a position requires of Thompson, as it did of Weber, a theoretically neutral observation language. Thompson has no such language, nor does, I believe, any practitioner in human science. Interpretation is not after the fact, but in the fact.

(3) That Thompson is essentially concerned with a study of actors' meanings, in the same way as Weber, is presumably uncontroversial. The notion of 'experience' refers to that amalgam of situationally specific values, norms and attitudes which Weber maintained had to be understood in order to explain human action. It is one of the achievements of the 'old New Left' to have interposed this realm of cultural determinants into the old mechanistic contraposition of base and superstructure. For Thompson this does not exclude study of structure or constraint or, indeed, causal explanation, though it is unclear to what extent Thompson believes that structures and constraints are themselves the acts and experiences of others. However, arguments for structure against culture differ by emphasis rather than principle.

(4) Thompson's stress on meaning is complicated by his view of the non-determinism of historical explanation. Presumably few practitioners in human sciences believe that law-like statements can ever produce more than trivial accounts of human actions, rather, most regularities in human affairs are probabilities rather than necessities, tendencies rather than universals. The important methodological point relates to the way in which such probabilities are conceptualized and analysed. Like Weber, though for different reasons, Thompson seems to want to make a primarily ontological point in stressing the

probabilistic character of behavioural regularities, referring to them as 'expectations'. His argument that 'historical explanation cannot deal in absolutes and cannot adduce sufficient causes'¹¹ seems concerned mostly to retain the notion of free will for human actors, to affirm that actors always have choices even though they are subject to constraints of various sorts. He implies that only probabilistic statements are possible because any actor can choose to disobey conventions or social rules. Thompson's methodological imperatives derive from and are consistent with his ontological thesis. But such a correspondence is not a necessary one, methodological precepts need not replicate such ontological-existential conditions. Thompson seems to assume otherwise, a condition which would explain his preference for the notion of eventuation — an undefined term, but one which appears to imply that the structures which he analyses are the consequence of actor-determined events. Once it has been accepted, however, that structures or structural constraints are real and effective, it seems more a matter of style in analysis whether such structures are presented as determinations or probabilities, or whether probabilities constitute structures. The important point is that Thompson's 'voluntarism' may be accepted as an ontological proposition without necessarily thereby introducing it as a methodological canon. If this is so, one of the great obstacles between history and theory collapses.

(5) In the context of his discussions of the non-rule governed, indeterminacy of human action Thompson betrays an attachment to ideal-types as the predominant form of historical concept. I say betray since he makes scathing remarks about ideal-types and models. Of historical concepts like 'crisis of subsistence' and 'familial development cycle' he says:

These concepts, which are generalised by logic from many examples, are brought to bear upon the evidence, not so much as 'models' but rather as 'expectations'. They do not impose a rule, but they hasten and facilitate the interrogation of the evidence, even though it is often found that each case departs, in this or that particular, from the rule. The evidence (and the real event) is not rule-governed, and yet it could not be understood without the rule, to which it offers its own irregularities.¹²

The status of such 'historical concepts' in Thompson's methodology is obscure. That they be 'generalised by logic' means nothing to me; and of course such concepts do not impose rules upon the past (a logical impossibility), or on the historian (an absurdity). However, for Thompson they can be neither empirical generalizations, events being unique, nor the fruits of theorizing. Yet he is forced to acknowledge their heuristic value: indeed, he admits that they are essential, saying that without them historical understanding is impossible, (i.e. an event 'could not be understood without the rule'). Hence I

deduce that a 'historical concept' must be a kind of abstraction of common properties from broadly similar events or processes. As such historical concepts fulfil exactly the same function as did ideal-types for Weber, as a means of conceptualizing unique events in terms of their generic properties. What differences there may be between Thompson and Weber appear to be to the credit of the latter. Consider the following passage:

Historical concepts and rules . . . display extreme elasticity and allow for great irregularities Historical materialism employs concepts of equal generality and elasticity — 'exploitation', 'hegemony', 'class struggle' — and as expectations rather than rules. And even categories which appear to offer less elasticity — 'feudalism', 'capitalism', 'the bourgeoisie' — appear in historical practice, not as ideal types fulfilled in historical evolution, but as whole families of special cases, families which include adopted orphans and the children of typical miscegenation.¹³

This is not a valid criticism of the Weberian ideal type since it has never been maintained that such types are 'fulfilled in historical evolution' and Weber was at pains to assert that 'pure' types rarely, if ever, existed. But where Weber gains is in his great concern with the definition of his types. 'Elasticity' may be an admirable property of chewing-gum and underwear but is surely inappropriate in concept formation. The fact that capitalism is not the same at all times in all places hardly justifies abandoning attempts to define carefully what is meant by the term. The difficulty of the problem confronted by Thompson is very real; but it would seem that he is in danger of dissolving all concepts by taking the argument about the uniqueness of event and process to a logical conclusion where concepts become merely dispensable, heuristic fictions. The generalizing character of language, the necessity of selection from all things past, the importance of 'collective actors', and the structure of explanation suggest that such an exercise is contradictory. A better solution is to acknowledge generic varieties of concepts: 'capitalism' may be an abstract descriptive concept, which permits identification of one type of social system from others, or an explanatory concept, which accounts for events and processes, types of social relationships, typical constraints, etc. Thompson's cavalier disdain for theoretical concepts no doubt results from polemical over-reaction to the formalistic concept construction of Althusserianism; but the solution is surely not to abandon regulated and precise concept formation.

MARXISM AND HISTORICAL METHOD

Of course, the convergence between Thompson and Weber is not total. Thompson works with different concepts and an opposed ethical

sub-structure. He also, significantly, shrinks from Weber's attempt to mobilize sociological theory as a hand-maiden of history. Nevertheless his methodological injunctions, and their deficiencies, are broadly similar. But such an account of adequate procedure is more incongruous in Thompson's case since it cannot easily be reconciled with Marxism or with his own practical-political Marxist orientation. This is particularly transparent in Thompson's reaffirmation of Weber's neo-Kantian distinction between science and politics, fact and value.

Despite the growing disenchantment with the precision of the term, there is an important sense in which Thompson's position should be designated as 'positivist'. Both sides of the 'new positivism' debate in Germany – between, at various times, Adorno and Popper, and Habermas and Albert¹⁴ – would recognize Thompson's methodological position as 'liberal positivism'. This debate, which Lichtheim points out was little more than a revival of the *Methodenstreit* debate in which Weber was active at the turn of the century,¹⁵ is between on the one hand neo-Marxist dialecticians who insist on a fundamental association between knowledge and interests, and, on the other, liberal positivists who deny the association and maintain the distinction between science and politics. (This radical separation of science and politics has been attacked from many positions, by philosophers of history, idealists, critical theorists, etc., and no purpose could be served by repeating the objections.) The most recent generation of positivists explicitly recognize that their position opens the way to irrationalism in the sphere of values, it cannot substantiate any connection between objective knowledge and prescriptions for political practice.¹⁶ But, while many of them may rest content with such a problem it is not easy to see how Marxism can be so sanguine since the notion of the unity of theory and practice is a fundamental tenet of its epistemology and its politics.

Marx intended theory and practice, and history and theory, to be indissolubly linked: he wrote as if such dualisms did not pertain; and he left a mass of textual documentation which could only be decomposed into such dualities at enormous cost in distortion and misrepresentation. It is possible that Marx was mistaken in believing that these traditionally irreconcilable philosophical dualisms could be dissolved. But that is not Thompson's claim. Instead, Thompson presents a historical account of Marx's work in order to show that Marx was not a social theorist but a historical materialist, where historical materialism is logically indistinguishable from history. Thompson's account is both historically wanting and, if it were correct, would necessarily imply major logical inadequacies in Marx.

Firstly, Marx made no break between his understanding of capitalist society and political-practical process of its transformation to socialism. He did not interpret the facts of the history of British capitalism subsequent to his empirical researches; he expressed acute annoyance

with philosophers who wanted to interpret rather than change the world; and he would never have recognized his theory as anything other than a political intervention. The formalization of the theory of truth which might underpin 'praxis' has never been resolved unambiguously: Kolakowski, Habermas, Rothenstreich, Avineri and Bauman,¹⁷ not to mention the Althusserians, have advanced various formulations of the proposition that the practicability of a theory is a measure of its validity. The problems of these approaches are undeniable; but they are no greater than those of the neo-positivists nor of those which attempt to historicise epistemological issues after the fashion of the *German Ideology*.¹⁸ The benefits of the praxical positions are, however, considerable. Not only are they consistent with much historical analysis including Marx's own but they retain the connection between intellectual rationality and normatively-rational political practice which is lost in the other formulations.

Second, Marx made no disjuncture between theory and history. This particular fracture, largely generated by the *Methodenstreit* debate and unhelpfully embodied in academic institutions as social science *versus* history, was not, seemingly, entertained by Marx. It is no more possible to annex Marx for history, which Thompson attempts to do historically, as to sequester him for theory, as Althusser tries to do theoretically. Looking here at the history side alone, if theory is as unimportant as Thompson makes out, if concepts are 'elastic', if history is a self-contained reconstitution of 'meanings in experience', then most of *Das Kapital*, as well as the *Grundrisse*, is redundant verbiage. Marx's irrelevancies would have to include his use of distinctions between essence and appearance and the abstract and the concrete; his concepts of commodity and surplus value; and, moreover, his critique of political economy. By trying to reconstruct Marx in such a way as to suggest that these were preliminaries to history-writing, for in Thompson's schema they cannot be history, nor can they be either the real past or products of historical investigation (at best they might be 'significances'), he passes the bounds of credulity. The desire to exorcise systematic theory from history deracimates historical materialism itself. For instance, Thompson appears to undermine most of the significant theoretico-historical achievements of historical materialism in the past decade. In particular he would jettison those inquiries which attempt to use historical laboratories for testing theory, despite their proven fruitfulness in recent social history and studies of class formation.¹⁹

Thompson unnecessarily sunders those links between theory and practice and theory and history which characterized not only Marx's writings but also many subsequent Marxist (and non-Marxist) works which are as politically committed to socialist humanism as are his own. And he does this primarily in the cause of reviving a distinction between science and politics. Yet such a distinction is no protection

against repugnant political practice. It is no small irony that the Frankfurt School made a coherent case for the proposition that the distinction between fact and value was a principal cognitive source of . . . Stalinism.

POLITICAL COMMITMENT AND HISTORICAL WRITING

It is, perhaps, the oddest paradox of all that the historical epistemology outlined by Thompson fails to redescribe his own historical practice. His work could stand as a perfect example of history-writing which demonstrates the impossibility of isolating fact from value, fact from concept, fact from interpretation, and concept from political commitment. A substantial component of the anti-positivist and anti-empiricist critique, advanced in history and sociology in the early 1970s, made precisely such a claim: analysis could not proceed without concepts 'contaminating' facts and the ideological assumptions of the author permeating the interpretation. Little of Thompson's writing would satisfy the canons of his own ideal procedures, for there is an intimate connection in his work between choice of subject matter, techniques employed, organizing concepts, ontological claims and political commitment. His historical writing corresponds with his methodological position only in so far as it is consistent with his political commitment. This can be demonstrated by comparing his political position, an example of his historical analysis, and his methodological claims.

Thompson's socialist humanism is founded on, *inter alia*, a Marxist critique, in ethical rather than economic vein, of capitalism as a system of class exploitation which can only be transformed through social revolution. He rejects as fundamentally flawed any political programme for social revolution which: (i) eradicates vision within the working class; (ii) subjects the working class to domination by party or organization; (iii) attempts to mobilize people on the basis of historical necessity or laws of history, since this would detract from, or contravene, the ontological status of the participants as free, moral individuals or real human beings; (iv) advances theoretical notions not in keeping with working class experience; (v) fails to recognize working class rationality and capacity for autonomous self-determination. If the schematic contraction of the position may be forgiven, Thompson espouses a libertarian, humanist socialism.

Consider next *The Making of the English Working Class*.²⁰ Its principal analytical historical categories and concepts are exploitation, class, class consciousness, culture and experience. The first three are of orthodox Marxist derivation; the other two hail from the 'old New Left' reaction to western communism. The book attends to episodes which, in the absence of sclerotic organizations or entrenched elites represented innovative strategies of resistance against emerging

industrial capitalism. The period was an heroic epoch of the English working class in which from earlier radical roots it developed a communalistic class consciousness. The evidence consulted – journals, pamphlets, correspondence, submissions to government commissions – indicated the ‘meanings’ and ‘experiences’ of working people. The interpretation of these experiences both censors the social order of the early nineteenth century and applauds the capacity of the working class to mount ethically justifiable, autonomous, oppositional campaigns. And the argument is framed in terms of the growth of a self-aware, class conscious proletariat.

The Making of the English Working Class is an exemplar of, in Thompson’s terms, ‘significant’ history. It ‘affirms’ socialist humanist ‘meanings’. Thompson’s political commitment is directly represented in his interpretation of what the working class was doing, how its experiences should be analysed, what concepts were most adequate for explaining experience, etc. However, it corresponds incompletely to the methodological propositions advanced in ‘The Poverty of Theory’. *The Making of the English Working Class* instantiates propositions 3 and 4, concerning meanings and voluntarism, but is dissonant with propositions 1, 2 and 5, regarding concept formation and value judgments. This may be illustrated briefly by considering the use of the concept of exploitation in *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson frames his discussion of socio-economic relationships in terms of the concept of exploitation,²¹ a concept which has a technical function within Marxist theory and an ordinary language usage as a term of condemnation. Examining the instances of his use of the term it is apparent that he uses it primarily in the former sense, in that he usually prefaces it by ‘economic’, relates it explicitly to the extraction of surplus value from labour,²² describes it as becoming more intensive²³ and more transparent,²⁴ and considers it as referring to a *relationship* between capital and labour. I would submit that the analytic use of the term is directly dependent upon an abstract concept, theoretically generated quite outside Thompson’s own disciplinary focus; that it is a concept which, at the same time, grants ‘significance’ and ‘intelligibility’ to the historical process, and thus is both descriptive and judgmental; and that it is at least an ideal-typical concept, though, in this usage, it should really be considered as an abstract, generative concept, the historical manifestations of which he charts in detail in subsequent chapters. So while Thompson uses the concept in a fashion consistent with his propositions about meaning and probability, it is *not* a ‘historical fact’ in his sense, it implies a mode of interpretation in the facts, and it is a precise, rather than an ‘elastic’, concept.

HISTORY AND THEORY

Given that Thompson's writing exhibits such a high degree of integration of concept, evidence, interpretation, ontology and political message, his methodological package constitutes a problem of explanation in itself. His actual mode of historical writing and analysis is exactly what would be expected and applauded by either a Marxist epistemology which links history, theory and practice, or by the Frankfurt School's vision of 'critical theory'. Why, then, should he develop a view of historical epistemology and procedure which denies the possibility of such integration, which radically separates politics from objective knowledge in a neo-Kantian, liberal positivist fashion, and which dissociates historical writing from Marxist theory? I remain a trifle puzzled by this phenomenon. No doubt it derives partly from Thompson's passionate commitment to socialist humanism, his disgust for Stalinism and his continuing sense that the 'old New Left' made a valuable political intervention, the lessons of which are in danger of being lost with the passing of time. No doubt also it arises from his combative polemical instincts which predispose him to employ any available weapon to rout the enemy. But that seems to be insufficient as an explanation of Thompson's current engagement. That is why I consider that the essay signifies, above all, a professional's defence of his occupational interests. Perhaps the most revealing element of the argument is the proposition that historical materialism is founded on procedures identical to those which form the basis of the collective practice of the historical profession. Despite the fact that the court of historical logic has been generally ill-disposed towards Marxist plaintiffs, Thompson submits their history entirely to the mercy of its professional rules of evidence. I doubt whether this humble submission will influence the court to any marked degree, but it must be debilitating in subsequent defences. 'The Poverty of Theory' is a *cri de coeur* for the autonomy and objectivity of historical practice, demanding near-total independence for history from other theoretical disciplines. As such it represents a regressive, imperialist appropriation of the corpus of Marxist works for history against theory: its claims for Marxism as history are as absolute and as grandiose as were those of *Reading Capital* when it exalted Marxism as theory. Neither set of claims can be supported.

Marx managed to write history and theory simultaneously. Many others have done the same. What disturbs me is that a major Marxist historian, in a fit of indignation against Althusserian anti-historicism, should stifle further dialogue between history and theory. For while the Althusserians were excessively uncharitable to the historians they had neither a monopoly of Marxist social theory nor an effective veto over historical theorizing. The philosophers of praxis continue to offer a more promising route to the integration of history, theory

and practice. Proclaiming the autonomy of history, or contriving theoretical procedures unique to the discipline of history, merely restores that artificial lacuna in social analysis, inherited from the *Methodenstreit* debate, which counterposed history and theory. Such an opposition causes acute epistemological problems for historical analysis, witness those of Thompson's exposition of historical method; it is unnecessary; and it disarms social criticism. 'The Poverty of Theory' contains no argument to establish that knowledge of the past is any different from knowledge of the present, except in so far as academic disciplines espouse different conventions. The promise of Marxist analysis was, once, that it could surmount the segregations of the academy. The current war between history and theory seems calculated to reproduce those segregations within Marxism.

Alan Warde
Department of Sociology
University of Lancaster

NOTES

*Thanks to John Urry and Michalina Vaughan for their comments on a draft of this paper.

1. E.P. Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory', in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London, Merlin, 1978. Critiques of this essay which I have consulted include; P. Hirst, 'The necessity of theory', *Economy and Society*, vol. VIII, no. 4, 1979, pp. 417-45; K. Neild and J. Seed, 'Theoretical poverty of the poverty of theory: British Marxist historiography and the Althusserians', *Economy and Society*, vol. VIII, no. 4, 1979, pp. 383-416; R. Johnson, 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and socialist-humanist history', *History Workshop Journal*, 6, 1978, pp. 79-100; K. McClelland, 'Some comments on Richard Johnson, "Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and socialist-humanist history"', *History Workshop Journal*, 7, 1979, pp. 101-15; G. Williams, 'In defence of history', *History Workshop Journal*, 7, 1979, pp. 116-24; S. Clarke, 'Socialist humanism and the critique of economism', *History Workshop Journal*, 8, 1979, pp. 138-55.

2. Thompson's primary targets are,

of course, L. Althusser, *Reading Capital*, London, New Left Books, 1970 and B. Hindess and P. Hirst, *Pre-capitalist Modes of Production*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975, esp. pp. 308-23.

3. 'Poverty of Theory', op. cit., p. 220.

4. E.g. G. Stedman Jones, 'History: the Poverty of Empiricism', in R. Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology and Social Science*, London, Fontana, 1972. It is interesting that the receptivity of socialist historians to social scientific theory, which was partially responsible for the critique of orthodox 'empiricist' historiography in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has very recently been either heavily qualified or entirely abandoned: cf. G. Stedman Jones, 'From historical sociology to theoretical history', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. XXVII, no. 3, 1976, pp. 295-305.

5. 'Poverty of Theory', op. cit., p. 219.

6. See the persuasive demonstration of this by T. Burger, *Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation: History, Laws and Ideal Types*, Durham, North

Carolina, Duke University Press, 1976.

7. 'Poverty of Theory', op. cit., p. 233.

8. Ibid., p. 234.

9. Ibid., p. 234.

10. M. Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', and 'Science as a Vocation', in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, pp. 77-128, and 129-56, respectively.

11. 'Poverty of Theory', op. cit., p. 242.

12. Ibid., pp. 237-8.

13. Ibid., p. 238.

14. See T.W. Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London, Heinemann, 1976.

15. G. Lichtheim, *From Marx to Hegel*, New York, Seabury Press, 1974, pp. 208-10.

16. Ibid., p. 213.

17. L. Kolakowski, *Marxism and Beyond*, London, Paladin, 1969, pp. 59-87; J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, London, Heinemann, 1972, pp. 43-64 and pp. 301-17;

N. Rotenstreich, *Basic Problems of Marx's Philosophy*, New York, Bobbs Merrill, 1965, pp. 46-53; S. Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp. 134-49; Z. Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 163-74.

18. For a survey of such attempts see G. Lichtheim, 'The concept of ideology', *History and Theory*, vol. IV, no. 2, 1965, pp. 164-95.

19. The debates on the labour aristocracy, working-class consciousness, trade union practice, etc., revolve around attempts to 'test' theoretical propositions.

20. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised edn, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968.

21. Ibid., chapter 6, 'Exploitation', pp. 207-32.

22. Ibid., p. 217 and, especially p. 222.

23. Ibid., pp. 217, 218 and 226.

24. Ibid., pp. 217, 218 and 221.